

SAN JOSE NEWS (CA)
11 December 1980

Keep the CIA in its place

THERE is good news and bad news from the Reagan transition team assigned to the Central Intelligence Agency; and at first glance, the bad seems to outweigh the good.

The team, headed by J. William Middendorf II, a former secretary of the Navy, wants to subject CIA intelligence estimates to competitive scrutiny, which may not be a bad idea. If the CIA had to defend its analyses and conclusions against those of other agencies, the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency, for example, the president and the American people might be better served in the long run. That's the good news.

The bad news is that the team apparently wants the CIA to get back into covert operations in a big way and to beef up domestic spying in the name of improved counterintelligence. Both these proposals carry heavy risks.

"Covert operations" need to be understood on two levels: What they once were and what they legitimately ought to be.

Time was when "covert operations" meant anything from "destabilizing" a nominally friendly government (as in Chile and Iran) to running a private war (as in Laos and Cuba). Most of the time, the efforts were less than smashingly successful.

Finally, excesses of this sort led Congress to clamp stringent oversight measures on the CIA, among them a requirement that the president clear such activities in advance, with the appropriate congressional liaison committees. Con-

gress' widely recognized inability to keep a secret has tended to discourage presidents from dabbling overmuch in this sort of cloak-and-dagger stuff.

We wouldn't want to see that changed. In the long haul, our national interests are harmed, not helped, if we are perceived as international gangsters bent on buying or bullying weaker nations. Too often in the past "covert operations" meant just that.

On the other hand, "covert operations" can be taken to mean keeping a full complement of secret (and productive) intelligence agents on station around the globe. This is not only desirable, it is absolutely essential in a world populated by mad ayatollahs and (who knows?) Kremlin adventurers.

The CIA's sole function should be to produce the information the president needs to conduct foreign policy rationally and intelligently; the CIA needs spies to accomplish its mission, but it doesn't need its own army of James Bonds.

Similarly, the CIA doesn't need to enlist the Federal Bureau of Investigation and local law enforcement agencies in establishing a "central file" on suspected foreign agents in the name of counterintelligence. This, too, has been tried before, and it has produced more political harassment than espionage prosecutions.

The CIA is legally and specifically forbidden from engaging in domestic spying, and we see no good reason to change the law. We trust President Reagan will see no reason to change it, either.